

# NEWS ANALYSIS

## Waits and measures

Paul Nesbitt prepares for confusion and disappointment as Microsoft continues to tinker with the many versions of its long-overdue Windows Vista

As we've waited more than five years for Windows XP's successor, the news that Microsoft is putting Vista's launch back by two months is not that big a deal. Unless you were hoping to buy a new PC for Christmas that will definitely work with the operating systems and software that most PCs will run for the next few years, that is.

When it arrives, will Vista be worth the wait? Will you even know which version to buy?

### GET WITH THE PROGRAM

Since its announcement the developers have dropped so many features from Vista that its main selling point for most people is the promise of improved security and the prospect of a more pleasant user interface. But that hasn't made the buying choice any easier. If you thought the burgeoning number of Windows versions was confusing – with versions for Tablet PCs and Media Center PCs, as well as professional and consumer editions – wait until you see Vista's line-up.

Microsoft is releasing six different versions of Vista. When you add the two browserless



versions the European Commission is insisting on, that's a total of eight. When Vista finally ships, you won't even have to commit to buying a particular version. Microsoft has announced its Windows Anytime Upgrade, which lets you upgrade your operating system online by buying a licence for a version with more features rather than going out and buying new discs. You'd think a company that was desperate to ship its flagship product, which is already two years behind

schedule, would be better off spending its energies on keeping it simple and getting it out.

### VISTA CURRY

So many original features have been jettisoned in an attempt to make the repeatedly delayed shipping date that you have to wonder how much of a selling point a new PC equipped with Vista Home Basic is. You get decent security (which should be a given with a commercial operating system), parental controls and

new search tools. You don't get Microsoft's luscious new Aero user interface with this version, though, or any Media Center features.

In Microsoft's defence, one might argue that the low-spec budget computers expected to run Vista Home Basic would not be able to run all the new technologies, but one could also argue that the omission is more likely to do with maximising revenue from a monopoly.

By contrast, Vista Home Premium offers all the above, plus the equivalent of today's Tablet and Media Center editions, as well as the ability to burn and author DVDs. Finally, here's something worth upgrading for.

However, in its determination to wheedle as much money as possible out of its customers, Microsoft has omitted one of the best features from all but its Enterprise Edition, which is available only to major corporate customers. Virtual PC Express enables you to run an older version of Windows as a virtual machine, so that old applications and games will still run on Windows. Backwards compatibility is kind of important, don't you think?

## Outside the fold

Microsoft unveils its Origami device, but Paul Nesbitt can't tell what it's supposed to be

Microsoft's latest initiative to persuade us to use Tablet-based PCs hasn't exactly been a success, and it's easy to see why. Microsoft's track record hardly inspires confidence. Has anyone bought a Portable Media Center yet? The latest venture, codenamed Origami, is so flawed that no large PC vendor has agreed to back it.

The fundamental problem with the Ultra Mobile PC (UMPC) is that it's a jack of all trades and a master of none. It's too large and heavy to be truly portable. In fact, most industry watchers believe the next big thing will be a mobile phone that offers the convenience of an iPod for listening to music, or

an iPod that provides telephony. US financial analysts are falling over themselves to predict when Apple's iPhone will appear.

The UMPC specification looks unlikely to appeal to people who want to play games, as it is nowhere near as well specified as Sony's PSP for this purpose. It has no optical drive so it won't take much business away from today's portable DVD players either. Movie downloads might be the way forward, but that's still some way off and the UMPC's paltry 30GB hard disk won't be able to store many movies once Windows has been installed. The battery life of three hours is hardly acceptable

either, especially as Microsoft envisages it running power-draining technologies such as WiFi, Bluetooth and GPS.

Although Microsoft predicts that telephony will be a large part of the UMPC's appeal, it's hard to see people talking into a book-size machine on their lap. Even with a Bluetooth headset, why would anyone bother when they could use a mobile phone?

The touch-screen interface and lack of keyboard make it less than ideal for working on the road. Even the larger Tablet PCs, with their focus on creating content rather than consuming it, have not been the hit Microsoft had hoped.

Then there's the mess that is Microsoft's Media Center, which has been left for dust by Apple's iTunes as a way of downloading and organising media content.

Finally, there is the price of \$1,000 (around £573) for the first UMPC device, which Samsung has produced. This is prohibitively expensive for a fast-selling consumer electronics device.

Microsoft says it expects prices to come down to about \$500 (around £286) and battery life to improve to support all-day use. But proclaiming that your product will probably get better will hardly compel people to go out and buy one today. ☹